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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
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INFO AMEMBASSY DHAKA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
AMEMBASSY OSLO
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
AMCONSUL CHENNAI
AMCONSUL MUMBAI
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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000146

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND H

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2018

TAGS: PHUM MOPS PREL CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: GSL CENSORSHIP PROMPTS BBC TO PULL FM
RADIO BROADCASTS

REF: A. COLOMBO 081

1B. COLOMBO 047
1C. COLOMBO 032
1D. COLOMBO 025
1E. COLOMBO 018

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) The BBC announced on February 9 that it was suspending its FM programming in Sinhala, Tamil and English from the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) due to "deliberate interference" by the government. According to a local BBC employee the suspension would affect 60-70% of the BBC's listeners in the country (short-wave and internet broadcasts continue). SLBC had been interrupting BBC programs covering the fighting in the north with music since late 2008. Hudson Samarasinghe, the chairman of SLBC reported to the press that he was not disturbed by the BBC decision because the broadcaster had been spreading false information about the government's humanitarian operations in the north. The BBC-SLBC arrangement to carry BBC reports on local radio had been in existence for over 20 years. While international press coverage, including the BBC's own report indicated that BBC broadcasts would continue on the private MBC radio network, MBC Station Head told PA FSN that the radio network had stopped transmitting BBC programs in November 2008. MBC was concerned that the inaccurate press reports would only bring added attention and accusations that they were supporting "anti-government international broadcasters" to the network that has already been the victim of one large scale attack in January (Ref E).

12. (U) In an unrelated announcement 10 independent U.N. experts released a statement on February 9 expressing "deep concern at the deteriorating human rights situation, particularly the shrinking space for critical voices." One of the experts, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders Margaret Sekagya noted that "a climate of fear and intimidation reigns over those defending human rights, especially over journalists and lawyers."

13. (C) COMMENT: The censorship and resulting suspension of broadcasts is a reflection of the deteriorating environment for journalists and independent voices (Ref A-E) as the military makes a final push to control the remaining LTTE-held territory in the north. The government has steadfastly maintained, however implausibly, its public stance that all reports of civilian casualties caused by government shelling are false. Increasingly, government

ministers and nationalistic politicians have lashed out at international organizations including the ICRC, U.N. and now the BBC for falsifying reports that contradict the official government position of "zero civilian casualties."

Blake